

Community group asks Grace to cooperate

By Roger Morris, Western News Publisher

The Citizens Advisory Group is requesting W.R. Grace cooperate immediately with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in cleaning up areas contaminated with asbestos-laden vermiculite.

The group, slightly more than 25 Libby area residents and local government representatives, voted Thursday night to send Grace a letter requesting cooperation. The vote followed nearly two hours of discussion on related issues, including a report from Paul Peronard, the EPA's on-site coordinator.

Peronard told the group that the EPA filed suit in U.S. District Court in Missoula against Grace seeking access to the mine to dispose of contaminated soil and debris from former Grace properties.

"Why doesn't this group pressure W.R. Grace to clean up this town?" asked Lerah Parker during the CAG meeting Thursday night. Parker is former owner of Raintree Nursery, which is one of the asbestos-contaminated areas being cleaned by the EPA.

Last week, Grace agreed to allow the EPA to access the former vermiculite site for testing but the company has denied access to the government agency for dumping excavated contaminated materials from the former Raintree site and nearby properties along the Kootenai River. Those properties were part of the mine's sorting plant and were not cleaned up when Grace closed the mine and left town.

"Why doesn't this group say, 'Hey, we want this cleaned up,'" Parker said. "It could get tied up for another year."

CAG member Cyrus Lee asked Lincoln County Commissioners Rita Windom and John Konzen if they had asked Grace for access to dispose of the contaminated materials. The county hadn't.

Konzen said the county might be able to use the health board declaring the contaminated materials a nuisance and requiring Grace to abate it.

"As health officer, I want to see it all cleaned up sooner not later," said Dr. Brad Black.

"These delay tactics are not in the best interest of the community."

Also, CAG voted to send letters urging various elected officials to request that Grace allow access to its former mine site for disposal of contaminated materials. Letters were to be sent to the county commissioners, the city council, state Legislative representatives Sen. Bill Crismore and Rep. Scott Orr, Gov. Marc Racicot and the Montana congressional delegation.

"For them (Grace) to say no to the EPA is one thing but for them to say no to the community whom they victimized is quite another," said Wilbur Wilson, CAG member.

Following reclamation of the vermiculite mine in the early 1990s, Grace sold the mine site and some river property to Kootenai Development Co. Another piece of property was sold to Mel and Lerah Parker, who developed Raintree Nursery on the site. And the mining company gave the land to the city that is now known as the industrial park.

The EPA was working on cleaning up the river front properties near Rainey Creek while Grace was ordered to clean up the industrial park. Shortly before the EPA was ready to begin hauling contaminated materials from the Raintree site, Grace announced it had purchased a controlling interest in the KDC lands and refused access to the government

agency.

The asbestos-contaminated vermiculite has been linked to numerous deaths in the past and more than 300 local people with various illnesses.

Extensive medical screening of the community is continuing to determine the health impacts of the contaminated ore from the mine, which ceased operation in 1990.